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ABSTRACT

A national sample of 118 teachers of learning disabled (LD) students described their school districts' criteria for identifying LD students and indicated their agreement or disagreement with the criteria. Four basic categories of definitions were reflected in the categories provided by the 118 teachers: ability-achievement discrepancy, achievement deficit, test scatter, and processing disorder. Reported criteria were characterized by variability, even within states, as were the teachers' stated agreement or disagreement with them. Findings suggested that the characteristics of students declared eligible for LD services are situation specific and do not reflect current knowledge, and that the criteria are vague and nonspecific. The need for alternative approaches to the identification of LD students was emphasized. (Author/CL)

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Research Report No. 108

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING LD STUDENTS: DEFINITIONAL PROBLEMS EXEMPLIFIED

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Abstract

A national sample of 118 teachers of LD students described their school districts' criteria for identifying LD students and indicated their agreement or disagreement with the criteria. Reported criteria were characterized by variability, even within states, as were the teachers' stated agreement or disagreement with them. Implications of the continuing definitional crisis in the area of learning disabilities are explored.

Criteria for Identifying LD Students: Definitional Problems Exemplified

It has been many years now since Mercer, Forgnone, and Wolking (1976) reported on their survey of definitions of learning disabilities used by state departments of education. At that time, they noted the variability in definitions used and suggested that the future success of the field of learning disabilities might be contingent upon the development of an acceptable definition of LD for practitioners and researchers. A survey of model LD programs by Thurlow and Ysseldyke (1979) revealed that at least seven different criteria were being used by 38 different centers to identify LD students.

Despite the field's recognition of the importance of a clear definition of learning disabilities and the need for concise criteria by which to identify LD students, the extent to which movement in this direction has occurred is questionable. A recent review of the literature revealed at least 47 different criteria that were suggested for use in identifying LD students (Epps, Ysseldyke, & Algozzine, 1982). However, current textbooks and other literature do not necessarily reflect the state of practice. The degree to which individual school districts have been able to develop workable criteria for identifying LD students is pertinent in addressing the issue.

LD teachers are those responsible for dealing with the students identified by school districts as being learning disabled. Their interpretations of their school districts' criteria for identifying LD students and their reactions to the criteria were the focus of the

present study.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 127 LD teachers from 36 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada. These subjects were ones who responded to a survey sent to 400 members of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD). The 31.8% response rate seemed to be artificially low due to the fact that not all CLD members are teachers of LD students. Although a cover letter requested recipients to forward the letter to LD teachers if they were not themselves LD teachers, the extent to which this occurred is unknown.

The communities in which the responding LD teachers were employed were characterized by 27 (21.2%) as rural, by 42 (33.1%) as urban, by 51 (40.2%) as suburban, and by 3 (2.4%) as a combination of two or three types; 4 (3.1%) individuals did not characterize their communities. Of the 127 subjects, 73 (57.5%) were teaching at the elementary level, 12 (9.4%) in middle schools, 25 (19.7%) at the secondary level, and 11 (8.7%) at more than one level; 6 (4.7%) individuals did not indicate the level at which they taught. The subjects included 7 (5.5%) males and 115 (90.6%) females; 5 (3.9%) individuals did not respond to this item.

Materials

A survey form asked teachers to specify their school district criteria for a student to be classified as LD and to indicate whether they agreed with the criteria. Teachers also were asked to provide

information about their backgrounds, the programs in which they were teaching, and the children served.

Procedure

In January 1981, surveys and stamped return envelopes were sent to 200 members of CLD. Two months later, an additional 200 CLD members were mailed the survey and stamped return envelopes. No attempt was made to send follow-up surveys to individuals who did not respond.

Results

Of the 127 teachers who returned the survey, 118 responded to the item about their school district criteria for LD classification. Of these 118 teachers, 49 (41.5%) agreed with the criteria, 30 (25.4%) disagreed, and 39 (33.0%) did not state specifically their agreement or disagreement with the criteria.

Four basic categories of definitions were reflected in the criteria provided by the 118 teachers: (a) ability-achievement discrepancy, (b) achievement deficit, (c) test scatter, and (d) processing disorder. No attempt was made to interpret responses that gave general items such as testing, team decision, federal or state guidelines, or learning problems as the criteria. These responses, plus others that were nonspecific or that indicated a noncategorical approach to special education placement, accounted for 38.1% of all responses. The nature of these responses will be explored later.

Of the 73 responses that could be categorized, 20 (27.4%) referred only to ability-achievement discrepancies, 14 (19.2%) referred only to achievement deficits, 2 (2.7%) referred only to test

scatter, and 3 (4.1%) referred only to processing disorders. The remaining 34 (46.6%) included combinations of the four categories. The most frequent combinations were (a) ability-achievement discrepancy + processing disorder (n = 11), (b) achievement deficit + processing disorder (n = 8), and (c) ability-achievement discrepancy + achievement deficit (n = 6). A list of the frequencies with which the basic categories and combinations of categories were given by the responding teachers appears in Table 1. Clearly, when summed across combinations, ability-achievement discrepancies were cited most often (n = 43), followed by achievement deficits (n = 35), processing disorders (n = 23), and test scatter (n = 11).

Insert Table 1 about here

Within categories of criteria, the extent to which teachers agreed or disagreed with the criteria demonstrated little consensus. These data are presented in Table 2. In most cases, the percentages of teachers who agreed and disagreed with a particular definition category were similar. Excluding those categories where percentages were based on less than 5 responses, only one (ability-achievement discrepancy + processing disorder) showed a difference of more than 15% in the two categories; however, in this case, almost equal percentages agreed and made no response.

Insert Table 2 about here

It should be noted that agreement or disagreement with a definition was coded only when the teacher explicitly indicated such. No attempt was made to interpret statements that were not explicit. However, some of the "no response" statements might easily be interpreted. Most of these non-explicit statements seemed to reflect disagreement with the definition. The following are some examples of non-explicit statements:

> We miss, though, "gray area" kids - those who don't qualify but aren't making it in classes.
>
> I feel the provision of average or above IQ should be specified.
>
> A good system with the usual "loop holes."
>
> If the guidelines were followed, I would agree with it, but most times the LD room becomes a dumping ground for many types of children.

Even within definition categories, the specific criteria differed. For example, within the ability-achievement discrepancy category, the following are but a few of the many criteria reported:

> Students must have severe discrepancy in one or more of seven areas (severe discrepancy as difference between achievement and expected level achievement).
>
> I.Q. of 80 and above with a differential between his actual and potential abilities.
>
> Significant discrepancy between I.Q. and achievement.
>
> One standard deviation below IQ in reading, mathematics, written language, or spelling.

Within the achievement deficit category, a variety of criteria also were specified:

> K-1: 6 month delay; 2-3: 1 year delay; 4-8: 2 year delay; 9-12: below 7.0 grade level. Plus must prove they are not other classifications (MR, OH, etc.).

IQ 80 and above, functioning two years below grade level.

Three to four years below grade level, usually compounded by hyperactivity, speech disability, behavior problems, etc.

At the high school level the student must be 50% below grade level in one of the academic areas.

Common areas of inconsistency among criteria were the extent to which the student must be below grade level and the minimum intelligence score the student could obtain.

Even within states, the criteria used by school districts varied greatly. Table 3 is a summary of the frequencies with which each basic definition category was reflected in the criteria reported by individuals in those states from which 5 or more responses were obtained. In only one state was the percentage of teachers specifying one of the definitions within the four basic categories above 25%. In one state, 43% of the teachers reported criteria that fell within the "other" category. These criteria were characterized by considerable variability also.

Insert Table 3 about here

The eight responses from Kansas exemplify the variability in criteria used within states. Only two of the eight criteria reported fell within one of the definitions (excluding the "Other" category). These were ability-achievement discrepancy criteria:

One standard deviation between IQ test and achievement test.

Average intelligence or above, not achieving as expected, deficiency in some area.

Three other responses reflected a combination of ability-achievement

discrepancy and other definition categories:

> Significant discrepancy between achievement and potential or a marked perceptual problem.
>
> Primarily intact, discrepancy between performance and expectancy, deviancy from norms and peer group.
>
> Normal IQ on WISC-R or WAIS, Draw-A-Person and Bender-Gestalt. Academic - Key Math and California Achievement Test (Reading). Scores on academic tests under 6th grade level.

One teacher reported the use of an achievement deficit criterion for identifying LD students:

> The student's achievement level is 2 or more years below his regular grade level.

Two other responses fell within the Other/Nonspecific definition category:

> A battery of tests developed on the Baysian theory, and a WISC-R.
>
> Normal IQ, learning and skill deficits related to specific Learning Disability; no evidence of physical, mental, socio-economic deficit that might affect learning.

As might be expected, the extent to which teachers within states agreed with their school districts' criteria also was highly variable. For example, within Kansas, 50% of the teachers agreed with the criteria and 12% disagreed; the remaining teachers did not specifically state their agreement or disagreement. Two of these teachers did not make any statement about their agreement with the criteria. The other teacher made the following comment:

> I agree with it as much as I can agree with any test or tests. Another component should be a test of social perception and periods of trial teaching.

Similarly, in Illinois 31% of the 13 teachers who responded indicated agreement with their school districts' criteria, 31% disagreed, and

38% did not specifically state their agreement or disagreement.

The Other/Nonspecific category included a wide range of criteria. Most of these could be characterized as some type of testing criteria. The following are examples of responses that fell within this subcategory:

> Must be low in many areas; tests must indicate problem; all members of multidisciplinary staffing must agree.
>
> School psychometric testing results.
>
> Standard test scores given by the resource room aide - academic - and psychologist - IQ and intelligence and perceptual, etc.

Adherence to state guidelines were reported next most often, followed by criteria that indicated some type of learning problem. Examples of responses that fell within the latter subcategory are:

> Primarily - difficulty in functioning in the regular classroom.
>
> Our "hard to teach" have been identified as having intellectual-visual and auditory integrity - but they are having difficulty learning in our regular programs.
>
> Above 80 IQ, trouble with school subjects.

Other subcategories that characterized the Other/Nonspecific responses were those that emphasized the team approach, use of a formula, or a non-categorical approach.

Several teachers made comments about the criteria being used by their school districts. The comment of one of the teachers who worked in several school districts confirmed the variability in criteria even within states. The following comment was made by this teacher:

> We serve 10 school districts. Each has own criterion. I do not agree with most of them. They tend to use a formula.

Other teachers commented on the lack of criteria within their school

districts:

> No specific criteria have been formulated. Some child study teams are using 70% of expected level and below qualify. Rest are individual building decisions.
>
> There is none. It depends on the teacher's philosophy, knowledge, and status of child's family in the community. I do not agree with it.

Several teachers noted that the criteria of their school districts resulted in the exclusion of some students who needed help:

> A formula is used to determine severe discrepancy; it does not always allow us to serve higher functioning LD students who need help in areas other than academics per se.
>
> Poor academic achievement with respect to potential. I do not agree - what about slow learners? Those functioning close to grade level with potential to be above?
>
> Must fall below a specified percentile rank as measured by/compared to IQ (individual) score, so "gifted" can qualify. We miss, though, "gray area" kids - those who don't qualify but aren't making it in classes.
>
> IQ 80 and above functioning academically 2 years below grade level. 2 years below - too much - esp. primary grades -should be special services for "slow learners" - they slip through cracks.
>
> Average or above IQ. Wide discrepancy between verbal and performance. Academic failure in regular class. I agree -but would like to see program broadened to include slow learners with LD characteristics.
>
> Same as Federal guidelines. Agree, except for a child being disqualified if learning problems are caused by environmental factors.

A number of teachers were quite strong in their agreement or disagreement with the criteria used in their school districts:

> There has to be a severe discrepancy between a child's expected achievement and actual achievement, in most cases at least a 1.5 or 2 year discrepancy. I believe that children less than 1.5 years behind still need individualized help, but that their needs can be met in a regular class. The problem is finding regular teachers who are willing to work a touch harder to provide for these students. What usually

> happens is that these students are ignored in the regular class until they miss so much that they do finally become 1.5 to 2.0 years behind and will then qualify for L.D., when early intervention in the regular class could have prevented this.
>
> A discrepancy of 2 years between academic performance and estimated potential ability. This is correlated with a WISC-R Full Scale IQ and the use of the WRAT, neither of which is adequate by itself. NO, I do not agree with the classification procedure - a 2 year discrepancy at the elementary level is a crime!
>
> 4 years deficit and discretion of Sp Ed Director. Hell NO!
>
> 1.90 or above IQ. 2.3 or more process disorders below 70%. Presently the system is working. I feel we have truly learning disabled studuents in the program.

Other teachers noted specific problems that their school districts were encountering in implementing the stated criteria:

> Severe discrepancy between present functioning and measured intellectual ability with accompanying processing problems. We are having difficulty deciding what a severe discrepancy is.
>
> "Normal IQ" with disorder in 1 or more processes not as a result of visual, hearing, motor, mental, or emotional handicap or cultural, environmental or economic disadvantage. We have most problems distinguishing between strength of disability or emotionality (which is more handicapping?) or separating disadvantaged from disabled.

One teacher expressed dissatisfaction with the teacher's role in identifying LD students:

> Average or above I.Q. (agree) Discrepancy between expected and actual achievement (somewhat agree). Depending on grade placement, a given number of grade levels below actual grade on achievement tests (disagree-actual performance should hold as much or more weight in determining "where he/she is"). I feel the classroom teacher's opinion should be regarded more highly instead of how the child did on tests. More observations by administrators since they decide on placement.

Others commented on the practice of placing students in LD programs even though the students might not fit a rigid definition. Some

viewed this in a positive light and others in a negative light:

> Yes. Significant discrepancy between performance and verbal IQ. Indication of average to above average intelligence or discrepancy between skills and performance. Diagnostic placements are made when testing does not indicate a clear pattern yet academic performance is weak. Criteria are flexible enough that children are not denied services because they cannot be labeled.

> There are state guidelines concerning the LD child. If the guidelines were followed, I would agree with it, but most times the LD room becomes a dumping ground for many types of children.

> No. L.D., M.R., perceptually handicapped, behaviorally-maladjusted and specific learning-disabilities are handled piece-meal, as if each is a "disease" unto itself. A perceptually handicapped child, thus, does not have any specific-learning-disability, and a learning disabled child is a general cover for kids they can't pin a more specific label on. At least emotionally disturbed students are allowed to have all or none of the above as they "choose."

One teacher's comments indicated that the problem was not with the criteria, but rather the regular classroom situation that leads to the referral of a student:

> Primarily - difficulty in functioning in the regular classroom. I would agree with it more if the regular classroom were small enough (# of students) and had flexible enough curriculum so that more students could be accommodated in regular classes.

Another teacher expressed general dissatisfaction with the whole process:

> I wish you'd asked what interferes most with teaching and disturbs teachers the most! I think the answer would have been unanimous--gov't. regulations.

Discussion

Criteria for identifying students as learning disabled remain highly variable from one state to the next, and even within states. The implications of such variability have been examined previously

(e.g., Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1982; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, in press; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Epps, in press). Too often, it appears that the characteristics of students declared eligible for LD services are situation specific (Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1980). Further, many of the criteria that are used do not reflect current knowledge. For example, 50% of the respondents indicating an achievement deficit criterion reported that the child needed to be at least two years below grade level. However, this practice tends to result in overestimating disabilities at upper grade levels while underestimating disabilities at the lower grade levels (Reynolds, 1981).

As described by the teachers responsible for dealing with LD students, the criteria being used by schools to identify the students, in general, are vague and nonspecific. They do not exhibit the universal and specific qualities that are necessary for adequate definitions of handicapping conditions (cf. Ysseldyke & Algozzine, in press). It is noteworthy that most of the criteria had to be categorized within a nonspecific "Other" category. Consistency among school districts in criteria used to define learning disabilities is low. Further, LD teachers show little consensus in their agreement or disagreement with the criteria that are used. On the whole, however, considerable negativism was evident in the comments made by LD teachers regarding the adequacy of the definitions. Unfortunately, suggested alternatives were few. Many of those suggested were similar to ones used in other school districts, and as often as not, teachers in those districts had indicated disagreement with them. Some teachers believed that slow learners should be served within the LD

category. Others indicated that LD students and slow learners needed to be differentiated by establishing higher IQ cutoffs. Some teachers believed that gifted students should be served within the LD category. Others did not. The teachers' comments suggest that not only is there little national consensus about a definition of learning disabilities, but there also is little agreement as to who should be served by LD services (cf. Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 1982).

The results from this survey of LD teachers provide additional evidence of the need for an alternative approach to the identification of LD students. Ysseldyke and Algozzine (in press) have argued that educators are focusing on the wrong issues in their attempts to define and redefine learning disabilities. The issue, rather, is what should educators be doing for students in need of remedial education because they are failing in school. Several of the teachers responding to the current survey made comments indicative of an awareness of this need, at least to some degree. Some spoke of the greater relevance of classroom teacher input than test data to the decision as to whether a student received special education services. Another spoke of the need for early intervention in the regular class with students whose deficits are not as severe as they will be in one or two years of no attention to their difficulties. Redirection of focus in special education toward instruction rather than classification has promise not only for students, but also for educators.

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Table 1

Numbers and Percentages of Teachers' Criteria Responses in Categories and Combinations of Categories

Category	Number	Percentage
Ability-Achievement Discrepancy	20	16.9
+ Processing Disorder	11	9.3
+ AChievement Deficit	6	5.1
+ Test Scatter	2	1.7
+ Ach Deficit and Test Scatter	4	3.4
Achievement Deficit	14	11.9
+ Processing Disorder	8	6.8
+ Test Scatter	2	1.7
+ Processing Disorder and Test Scatter	1	0.8
Processing Disorder	3	2.5
Test Scatter	2	1.7
Other (Nonspecific)	45	38.1

Table 2

Percentage of Teachers Agreeing or Disagreeing with Various LD Criteria[a]

Category	Agree	Disagree	No Response
Ability-Achievement Discrepancy	40.0	25.0	35.0
+ Processing Disorder	54.5	0.0	45.4
+ Achievement Deficit	33.3	33.3	33.3
+ Test Scatter*	50.0	50.0	0.0
+ Ach Deficit and Test Scatter*	25.0	50.0	25.0
Achievement Deficit	35.7	35.7	28.6
+ Processing Disorder	25.0	12.5	62.5
+ Test Scatter*	50.0	50.0	0.0
+ Processing Disorder and Test Scatter*	100.0	0.0	0.0
Processing Disorder*	33.3	0.0	66.7
Test Scatter*	100.0	0.0	0.0
Other (Nonspecific)	31.1	20.0	48.9

[a]Percentages are based only on those responses within a category. Percentages for categories with * following them were based on less than 5 responses.

Table 3

Numbers and Percentages of Teachers' Criteria Responses in Categories and Combinations of Categories for States Represented by at Least Five Responses[a]

Category	State AL	CA	IL	KS	OH	PA
Ability-Achievement Discrepancy	1(20)	2(22)	1 (8)	2(25)	2(40)	1(20)
+ Processing Disorder	0	1(11)	0	1(12)	1(20)	1(20)
+ Achievement Deficit	1(20)	0	1 (8)	1(12)	1(20)	0
+ Test Scatter	0	0	1 (8)	0	0	0
+ Ach Deficit and Test Scatter	0	2(22)	0	1(12)	0	0
Achievement Deficit	0	2(22)	0	1(12)	0	0
+ Processing Disorder	1(20)	0	1 (8)	0	0	0
+ Processing Disorder and Test Scatter	0	0	1 (8)	0	0	0
Processing Disorder	0	0	0	0	0	1(20)
Test Scatter	0	0	1 (8)	0	0	1(20)
Other (Nonspecific)	1(20)	2(22)	6(46)	2(25)	1(20)	1(20)
Total	5	9	13	8	5	5

[a]Percentages are in parentheses.

PUBLICATIONS

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